A Case Study of Measuring Outcomes in an MPA Program

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Abstract

Many MPA programs are struggling to identify ways to evaluate their outcomes. This paper describes the development and implementation of a method for assessing student learning outcomes in the MPA program at the University of Colorado Denver. The multi-method approach makes use of rubrics to examine whether students demonstrate the desired knowledge and skill, and student surveys to describe students' perceptions of their abilities in the same areas. Means for gaining faculty commitment to the process and making use of the information for program improvement are discussed.

A Case Study of Measuring Outcomes in an MPA Program

Public institutions today are struggling to respond to increasing demands for accountability and improved productivity (Alexander, 2000). The Federal government, through the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) in 1993, began requiring government agencies to monitor progress in achieving their goals and objectives (P.L. 103-62, 1993; U.S. Governmental Accounting Office, 1997). That effort continues today with the Performance Assessment Rating Tool (PART) (U.S. Governmental Accounting Office, 2004; Posner & Fantone, 2007). Similarly, United Way and other nonprofit agencies have mandated outcomes-oriented evaluations from the organizations they fund (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000). Stakeholders, and the public in general, have learned to expect outcomes-assessment as one sign of an effectively managed organization. By reinforcing the external pressures for improved public sector performance, outcomes indicators have emerged as a means to improve institutional efficiency and effectiveness internally (Alexander, 2000).

Institutions of higher education, their accrediting bodies, and related professional associations somewhat belatedly joined in this focus on outcomes (Jennings, 1989; Briggs, Stark, & Rowland-Poplawski, 2003). Though many in higher education argue that its outcomes are difficult to define and even more difficult to measure (Roberts, 2001; Williams, 2002), the demands of state legislators and other stakeholders have forced higher education to confront the task of defining and identifying the changes they hope to bring about in their students. In public administration, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) now requires that programs seeking accreditation define and measure their goals and objectives (NASPAA, 2000).

While these cultural expectations and mandates have forced Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs to examine outcomes, one of the most important reasons for studying outcomes is for internal consumption, in order to provide organizations with information for improvement and learning (Durant, 2002). Establishing outcomes, discussing them, and measuring them provide program administrators and faculty with information – information not only to debate and discuss, but also to help guide program changes and progress. Briggs, et al. (2003), note that outcomes data can become part of an ongoing, cyclical process to guide faculty and program administrators, and to inform external stakeholders.

MPA programs and faculty teach performance-monitoring and assessment as a management tool. Recognizing the value of the method, we must apply it to our own programs. As teaching faculty, we routinely assess student performance in our courses. We recognize that the nature of our course content is abstract and difficult to assess. Yet, semester after semester we grade tests and student papers, and assess performance. Our grades reflect our somewhat subjective, though informed, estimate of each student's knowledge of the course material. Nevertheless, faculty have been reluctant to apply similar methods to the aggregate of these courses — their degree programs.

Some of this reluctance stems from the learned role of faculty. We are much less likely than teachers in K-12 education, trainers in a large organization, or even mid-level managers in an agency to work together as a team to develop a course, curriculum, or program. Our work as university instructors, much more so than that of other teachers, is conducted alone (writing, planning course lectures, grading) or in front of a classroom. Working as an equal member of a team in a collaborative fashion does not come easily to faculty who are trained to critique (research, student performance) rather than to work as a team that builds programs. Outcomes in higher education can be measured to meet external mandates with a minimum of teamwork, but to be effective in program improvement, those managing the outcome study must consider how to involve faculty.

This article will build on others published in this journal concerning ways in which a program may address outcomes assessment (Jennings, 1989; Roberts, 2001; Durant, 2002; Aristegueta & Gomes, 2006). Like others, our approach builds on two key principles: (a) use of multiple measures, and (b) involvement of faculty. The value-added aspect of our approach is that we make use of these multiple measures to assess student performance, with reference to our program goals. We will describe the process and measures developed by the first author of this article — MPA director, and faculty in the School of Public Affairs (SPA), at the University of Colorado Denver (UCD) — the policies developed to facilitate this process, and the use of information. Our intent is to introduce some new ways to measure outcomes concerning student learning, and to describe the process used to involve faculty in the development of these outcomes, which increases the internal use of results.

Measuring Program Outcomes

In 1989, Edward Jennings foreshadowed the move of NASPAA and MPA programs to assess outcomes, noting that, in the past, program quality had been assessed and accountability had been established through examining inputs such as course content and faculty qualifications, or through opinion surveys on the programs' reputation. While inputs and reputational surveys remain key methods for NASPAA, students, and other stakeholders to determine the value of a program (e.g., NASPAA standards on curricula and faculty, widely cited *U.S. News and World Report* rankings based on surveys), the newer criterion of examining outcomes, as urged by Jennings, has been the focus of many published articles, plus papers and workshops at professional conferences.

The articles, papers, and workshops on the topic reflect the struggles of MPA faculty and administrators in reaching a consensus about what outcomes to measure and how to measure them. Williams (2002, p. 45) effectively describes what he calls the "search for that Holy Grail of outcome assessment that captures the essence, gives insight to much, is on target, and has no flaws." Noting Simon's ideas on satisficing, and Lindblom's incremental models, Williams argues that directors and faculty of MPA programs should abandon their search for the Holy Grail and develop general indicators that are useful, though not perfect, in guiding their programs. He describes an effective system developed at West Virginia University that links student surveys, routinely collected operational data, grades, course evaluations, and other qualitative and quantitative measures to the program's mission.

Most schools make use of surveys to assess outcomes. For example, Roberts (2001) discusses a variety of ways that programs can utilize surveys of current students, graduating students, alumni, and area employers to gain information on program outcomes and needs. In his study of MPA outcomes, local employers provided useful information on whether graduates were using the knowledge and skills they had gained, and whether the program provided students with competencies that were relevant to the job. Williams (2002) and others (Aristegueta & Gomes, 2006) also describe using surveys in different ways to measure student outcomes. Thus, surveys are an accepted way to capture outcome information.

Robert Durant (2002) first raised the option of using the capstone course as a means for defining and assessing program outcomes. He describes how his program at the University of Baltimore used the capstone course as "a driver for strategic thinking about program development as a whole" (p. 194). Unlike other courses, many faculty were involved in this course, as either the coordinator, as a lecturer for one or two sessions, or as readers of student projects. The involvement of many faculty in this one course, the last in the program, prompted them to consider the knowledge and skills of students as they completed the program. It also provoked faculty conversations about program outcomes, and, subsequently, course content and methods. Durant notes that, although most faculty avoided teaching or coordinating the capstone course due to the perceived heavy workload, all core faculty became familiar with it by serving as guest lecturers, second readers for papers, or as course coordinators. Because it was the last course students took to complete the program, their performances gave this larger faculty group a shared opportunity at the end of the program to observe and discuss their expectations. Although Durant and his colleagues appear to primarily use surveys, student evaluations, and their impressions of student work to judge performance, Durant effectively argues that using a capstone course to discuss program goals and performance provides a "manageable, low-profile" means for engaging faculty in strategic planning.

More recently, Aristegueta and Gomes (2006) describe how the MPA program at the University of Delaware has worked to align two surveys — an exit survey of students and a survey of stakeholders — with the progam's mission and goals. As they note, alignment is a "paramount concept in mission-driven performance management" (p. 9). Their article illustrates the importance of careful planning in considering the content of survey questions and linking them to both mission and information needs. In their case, the need was to assess the eight goals stated in their mission. These eight goals, however, are primarily concerned with program processes, e.g., (a) maintaining a set of core courses and specializations, (b) providing experiential learning, (c) developing and maintaining an internship program and relationships with government and nonprofit organizations, and (d) conducting research. As such, the goals and the survey items only indirectly tap the outcomes of student knowledge and learning. (For example, one item presented in the article asks students to rate their satisfaction with the knowledge gained.) Their results provide useful information on the program and have led to changes in courses and specializations, but they note the need for future assessments to develop "tools to evaluate comprehensive learning (as opposed to perception …)" (p. 14).

These articles informed the process for studying student outcomes in the MPA program at the University of Colorado Denver in several ways. We recognized surveys as a frequent, and legitimate, means of collecting information on student outcomes, but saw that such surveys have limitations. They often rely on self-reported information from students or employers who, while having useful details about alumni performance on the job, may lack sufficient information to link that performance to specific elements of the academic program. In attempting to address the NASPAA standard that requires "that the program shall assess its students' performance and the accomplishment of its objectives" (NASPAA, 2000, Assessment 2.2), we wanted to move toward assessing actual student performance at the end of the program. In doing so, we chose to follow Durant's (2002) suggestion for using the capstone course as a forum for assessing final student performance, but hoped to develop better measures for doing so. Finally, Aristegueta and Gomes' (2006) research pointed to the importance of aligning measures with goals. In their case, the focus was on certain program processes articulated in their mission. In our case, we hoped to align outcome measures with the knowledge and skills we hoped that students would be able to demonstrate at the end of the program. This strategy would be more congruent with the NASPAA standard on measuring student performance.

Rubrics as a Means for Assessing Performance

As noted above, we did not want solely to use surveys to measure student performance. Students' self-reports concerning knowledge and skills gained are certainly useful, and we would continue to use this strategy for these items. But these measures fail to examine actual student performance. One weakness of using surveys alone is the inherent bias of respondents, who are invested in positive outcomes. Graduates, of course, feel that they have gained knowledge and skills. They have spent money and time to complete the program, and most would hope that they had gained something from their efforts. Assessing student outcomes requires multiple approaches, and one approach needs to include a systematic examination of the actual knowledge and skills that students have obtained. In this way, faculty, administrators, students and other stakeholders can make a judgment about the program's level of success. But, how can we measure the sophisticated types of change that MPA programs hope will occur in students? Like Williams (2002), we believe the search for the perfect measure — or the concern that we must have a perfect measure and that developing one is too costly — has inhibited exploration of these types of student outcomes.

To initiate our search for a good (but not perfect) measure of outcomes, we began to explore rubrics. Rubrics have been used for some time in many different fields, originating in K-12 education, but currently used across the curriculum in higher education (Peat, 2006; Wolf & Stevens, 2007). Barbara Peat (2006) writes persuasively about how she used a rubric in a public administration class to assess and improve student performance in writing a literature review. A rubric contains two components: (a) a specification of the criteria that will be used to assess performance, and (b) the development and description of performance levels for each criterion (Moskal, 2000; Mertler, 2001; Wolf & Stevens, 2007). Rubrics serve several purposes. Specifically, they help students to understand the requirements of an assignment, that is, what they are supposed to do and/or demonstrate. As such, a rubric can improve student performance, by helping the student focus on appropriate actions for completing the assignment. Secondly, instead of providing a few comments on a paper, the rubric offers more specific, constructive feedback on student performance.

This research on rubrics led us to conclude that a rubric might be used effectively in the capstone course to assess student performance. More importantly, for the purposes of the program, if the criteria for the rubric were aligned with desired program outcomes for students, the rubric could serve as an effective assessment of the learning process used by students in the program. Our job was to consider how to make use of surveys and rubrics to measure student outcomes, and how to engage faculty in doing so.

History of Outcomes at SPA

For many years, the MPA program at SPA had surveyed students and alumni to learn about student experiences, their levels of satisfaction with the program, their reasons for enrolling in the program, career aspirations, and, with alumni, their current positions and use of information gained in the program. Results of these surveys were used by administrators and faculty to make changes in courses, advising methods, and other processes.

Development of the capstone class. Until the fall of 1997, the SPA had used comprehensive exams to judge student learning and to determine whether students should proceed to graduation. In spite of changes to the format, content, and grading procedures for the exams, the faculty felt the comprehensive exam did not provide them with a picture of students' overall learning, or the knowledge and skills they gained. In 1997, the faculty worked together to plan a capstone course experience that was intended to provide students with an opportunity to integrate what they had learned by either undertaking a project for a client, or conducting a research project.

That capstone experience, with some policy revisions, continues today. Most students conduct a client project in a role akin to that of a consultant. The client presents a problem, i.e., a program-related problem, a financial problem, a personnel problem, or an evaluation problem, and the student, through a combination of (a) talking with the client and others at the agency, (b) reading agency reports and proposals, (c) visiting the program, and (d) reviewing scholarly literature on similar programs and/or similar problems, develops a way to address the problem. The instructor for the course works with students and, occasionally, clients, to ensure that the projects allow students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have gained from the program and to integrate some of what they have learned. Each project includes three readers: the primary instructor, the client, and a second faculty member. The primary instructor and second reader refer the student to scholarly literature, make recommendations on student plans, and also read drafts of surveys, interview protocols, financial plans and other work for the project. The student's job, however, requires some independence in integrating this feedback, interpreting agency information and needs, identifying and using appropriate scholarly literature to guide the project, and, lastly, carrying out the project. Students complete two drafts of their final paper and make a formal presentation to the three readers.

For many years, students' performance in the capstone was graded like performance in any other course. But, as student outcomes received more attention in the university and in the world of higher education, program administrators realized that the capstone provided a forum for examining and assessing those outcomes.

Considerations in Measuring Student Outcomes: Measures and Process

Jody Fitzpatrick, the first author of this article and a long-time faculty member at SPA, recently had been appointed director of the MPA program. She recognized the need to respond to demands from NASPAA and from administrators at UCD for measuring student outcomes. Fitzpatrick became familiar with rubrics as a method for assessing outcomes in courses, and considered that such a rubric might be useful in measuring student outcomes in the capstone class. Because the class was designed for students to demonstrate what they had learned in the program, such a rubric would provide a way to more objectively examine the success of the program in achieving its objectives with students.

Although a rubric for assessing capstone performance would provide one method for measuring the program's success in achieving its goals with students, multiple measures were needed. Performance on the capstone project represented one event, and while students were directed to meet clients' needs, the particulars of those needs meant that individual projects did not necessarily represent all that a student could do.

Like Roberts (2001) and others (Jennings, 1989; Durant, 2002; Aristegueta & Gomes, 2006), Fitzpatrick believed that surveys could provide useful information to complement the results of the rubric if the survey items tapped similar outcomes. The strength of the rubric for the capstone was that it would illustrate students' actual knowledge and skills; the limitation was that these were skills in one setting. Survey items could be used to learn about students' knowledge and skills in many settings, but the survey items would need to improve. Traditionally, surveys of students and graduates are concerned with gaining information on students' satisfaction with a program and its particular elements, and these items are useful. But, satisfaction only indirectly taps students' impressions of the knowledge and skills they have obtained. Instead, although she wanted to continue learning about students' satisfaction with various elements of the program and the program as a whole, the program director recognized the need to develop new survey items directly to ask students and alumni about the knowledge and skills they had gained from the MPA program. The survey would ask directly about criteria tapped through the capstone rubric, but these self-assessments would provide information on how students and alumni perceived their performance in these areas in *many* settings. Further, the survey could tap areas that were not covered by the capstone rubric.

Finally, as Aristegueta and Gomes (2006) note, alignment is important. In their case, they were aligning survey items with elements of the program mission. At UCD, it would be important to align criteria for the rubric and survey items with program objectives regarding student performance.

In addition to considering ways to measure student outcomes, the MPA director had to consider ways for obtaining, not only faculty cooperation, but also faculty interest and involvement in this process. With such interest and involvement, she hoped to increase the faculty's sense of ownership in the program overall and thus increase their input into it. Faculty would need to be involved in the development of the plan and, more broadly, in teaching the capstone. One of her first changes, before beginning consideration of rubrics, was to rotate the responsibility for teaching the capstone course across all faculty. She had taught the capstone course several times and realized how this final role of teaching and examining student performance in a real-world setting prompted others who taught the course to think more about defining SPA's desired outcomes for students, and to consider where in the program the knowledge and skills for these outcomes are obtained. By involving more faculty in teaching the capstone course, program ownership and input could be obtained, and interest in examining and assessing outcomes could be increased.

The Outcome Assessment Plan

The first step in developing the plan was to identify our global objectives with students. As Jennings (1989) and Williams (2002) state, student outcomes can be difficult to define. Again, the program director was cognizant of Williams' (2002, p. 46) warning against the search for the Holy Grail. Our global objectives should reflect outcomes, but we could begin rather broadly.[1] Our general indicators came from the following program objectives concerning students:

Students completing the MPA program will be able to

a) Make use of their knowledge of public administration or nonprofit theory, research, and practice to solve problems;
b) Think critically about problems faced by public and nonprofit administrators and policy makers, and use problem-solving skills to address those problems;
c) Communicate effectively in writing;
d) Communicate effectively orally.

These objectives were developed through faculty discussion. While general, the objectives convey key student outcomes anticipated from the program that also cross the MPA curricula. Further, they reflect the knowledge and skills required of public administrators to work effectively in the field. As such, they would serve as the foundation for our assessment of the success of the MPA program in achieving student outcomes.

Developing the Capstone Rubric. Having determined these outcomes, the faculty concluded that students' capstone projects can and should demonstrate these outcomes. Our work involved developing a rubric to assess those outcomes. The criteria for the rubric should obviously reflect these four outcomes. A major challenge was to develop scoring criteria to reflect different levels of success in achieving them. We reviewed references on rubrics (Moskal, 2000; Mertler, 2001; Wolf & Stevens, 2007) and examined rubrics from other departments and schools. The director of the MPA program developed a draft rubric and sought input from faculty on ways to conceptualize various levels of performance. We initially decided on a three-point rating scale with levels for "above proficient," "proficient," or "below proficient." We then brainstormed indicators of these levels of performance. Table 1 presents indicators for each level for two of the criteria — knowledge of public administration and oral communication skills. As shown, the descriptions listed under each criterion are not comprehensive; the student does not have to obtain each bulleted item to achieve that level. Instead, the descriptions communicate to the student, and to the readers, the types of performance that illustrate each level. Note that oral communication includes bullets concerning not only the oral presentation, but also the student's ability to communicate with the client, instructor, and other readers. The descriptors concerning performance on the knowledge of public administration criterion include identifying relevant literature, understanding its relevance to the project and explaining it well, and applying it in carrying out the project. Unlike Peat's rubric (2006), where the emphasis was on the criteria, and the scoring was a relatively simple point system, our goal with the rubric was to define what constituted different levels of performance under each criterion. This explication of levels is consistent with much of the literature on rubrics (Moskal, 2000; Mertler, 2001; Wolf & Stevens, 2007).

Providing this detail about what constitutes levels of performance helps the rubric achieve its intended goals. First, students have a better idea of how their performance will be assessed and they know precisely what constitutes high, medium, and low levels of performance. They receive the rubric at the orientation to the capstone course, which is conducted in the previous semester. They then are able to refer to it, and are encouraged to do so by faculty throughout the course. Second, instructors and other readers in the advanced seminar, generally second faculty readers, are able to make use of the descriptors to highlight to students, at the draft stage, the areas in which they need to improve and how they might go about doing that. In what is a quite complex, semester-long project for students, and a stressful time for them as they work through drafts near the

Table 1. Descriptions of Levels of Performance on Two Criteria

	Below Proficient	*Proficient*	*Above Proficient*
Knowledge of public administration or nonprofit theory, research, and practice	• The student demonstrates little knowledge of scholarly literature relevant to the subject. • Scholarly references are not cited. • Relevance of references to project is unclear. • Theory and research from public administration or non-profit management are used incorrectly or insufficiently to guide the project and/or draw conclusions. • The student is unable to find relevant scholarly literature in the Public Affairs or Nonprofit field to help shape the project.	• The student cites at least five scholarly articles or books relevant to the conduct of the project. • The student describes the relevant theory, research, and/or practice in the area of his or her project in an informed, knowledgeable manner. • The student presents relevant theory, research, and practice, and applies it correctly to the project being conducted. • In conducting the project, the student makes use of scholarly literature to guide his or her actions.	The student meets the criteria for proficient and two or more of the following: • Identifies literature that is very pertinent and informative for conducting the project; • Demonstrates a sophisticated knowledge of the Public Affairs research literature; • Makes innovative applications of the literature to the project in question.
Effective oral communication	The student is unable to communicate effectively with • The client to understand the problem to be addressed; • The instructor and SPA readers to understand the requirements for the course and/or feedback on papers submitted; • The committee at the final presentation to answer questions clearly and correctly; or • The committee at the final presentation to clearly and succinctly highlight the project and its accomplishments.	The student demonstrates effective oral communication skills through • Communicating effectively with the client to understand the agency/organization and the problem the client would like the student to address (NA for research projects); • Communicating effectively with the instructor to understand the requirements of the course and readers' feedback on the paper; • Communicating effectively with other readers of the paper to understand their concerns and to obtain suggestions for references, methods, and conclusions; • Making an effective oral presentation of the project, providing appropriate background, methods, key findings and recommendations in a clear, understandable, and interesting manner; • Making effective use of visuals to aid the oral presentation; • Effectively answering questions from readers in response to the presentation. Answers are technically correct and clear.	The student demonstrates exemplary oral communication skills • Through an oral presentation that is stimulating and an excellent summary of key issues; • By explaining complex issues concerning data and/or organizational issues with exceptional clarity and/or insights; • In interactions with all readers, by showing the ability to listen well, and asking thoughtful, useful questions; • When questions from readers following the presentation are answered completely and clearly, with answers adding valuable insight to the project.

Note: The characteristics listed under each level are intended to be illustrative of student performance at that level. Advanced seminar projects and topics differ. Students do not need to achieve each bullet listed in order to be judged at that level.

end of the course, such specific feedback helps students see where to concentrate their work. Third, and finally, the specific descriptions help the three readers who are rating the project to either more readily achieve consensus on strengths and weaknesses, or find the language to articulate their different assessments of a student's paper. *(See Table 1.)*

Revising Stakeholder Surveys. The advantage of using multiple measures is in the selection of measures that have different strengths and weaknesses to triangulate the construct (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Yin, 2003; Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004). Using multiple measures that are quite similar defeats the purpose of using multiple measures to build validity. So, assessing another capstone project would not be as effective as considering a different way to learn of students' knowledge and skills. Because the rubric allowed us to judge students' actual knowledge and skills as demonstrated in one setting, surveys of students and alumni would also be used to gain information on students' knowledge and skills, but in many settings.

Another weakness of the rubric is the difficulty in determining the extent to which students' performance is due to the program. It is not practical to use the rubric as a pre-measure, but survey items may be constructed to ask students about their perceptions of the role of the MPA program in improving their skills.

Table 2 presents the series of survey items used to collect this information.[2] Note that the first four items correspond to the knowledge and skills assessed on the capstone rubric. These permit the faculty to compare results from each method of assessment. The remaining seven items provide information on learning in more specific areas, e.g., budgeting, research skills, ethics, current issues, which may or may not have been called for on a capstone project. Although other items on each survey ask respondents to report their satisfaction with different elements of the program, and the program overall, it is important to observe that these items are not asking students or alumni to report satisfaction. Instead, they are asked to estimate the degree to which each factor was developed or improved by their participation in the MPA program. The wording of the items prompts students to focus on their knowledge and skill and the changes they perceived in them. Equally important, the wording insures that the survey items, like the capstone rubric, are aligned with program goals for student outcomes. *(See Table 2, next page.)*

Use of the Outcomes for Internal Management

One of the most important reasons for measuring outcomes, however, is to engender organizational learning and improvement (Jennings, 1989; Durant, 2002). Examined from this perspective, the outcomes assessment and the steps leading to it brought many changes to the program. Requiring all faculty to teach the capstone course gave them more intimate knowledge of the struggles and performance of students in the last semester of the MPA program. Meeting

Table 2. Survey Items on Knowledge and Skills Obtained in MPA Program

Please rate the effectiveness of your MPA program in helping you develop the following knowledge and skills. Use this scale:

1 = Greatly enhanced my skills in this area
2 = Somewhat improved my skills in this area
3 = Slightly improved my skills in this area
4 = Did not improve my skills in this area

___ My knowledge of the scholarly literature in public affairs
___ My oral communication skills
___ My ability to communicate effectively in writing
___ My critical thinking skills
___ My skills in managing people
___ My skills in managing an organization
___ My skills in developing and managing a budget
___ My knowledge of current issues facing public and nonprofit organizations
___ My skills at analyzing data or research information
___ My skills in working in a political environment with different stakeholders
___ My ability to behave in an ethical manner in my work setting

together to define desired student outcomes and to develop and revise the rubric prompted faculty discussion about the nature of outcomes and the desired levels of student performance. The first semester with the rubric yielded much discussion, as faculty began to use it to rate student performance. Faculty readers and clients were sometimes confused by the rubric. For example, some readers did not view each bullet as *illustrative* of performance, but thought students must achieve all the bullets listed at each level. Another source of discussion came when readers began to evaluate performance and recognized that key areas of strength and weakness on various criteria were absent from the descriptors. For example, oral communication skills initially focused solely on the formal presentation of results and ignored communication between the student and his or her client and other readers during the course. Similarly, initial descriptors on use of public administration and nonprofit literature focused on finding references, with little regard for applying them appropriately to the project. Thus, students who completed an excellent review of literature and then proceeded to ignore the literature in carrying out the project could be rated as above proficient. The faculty also argued over how much to enumerate. Did listing a number of references to be cited lead students to not exceed that number? Did listing a number of references imply quantity was more important than quality? The rubric was revised for the next semester, and we anticipate further discussion and revision at the end of each semester.

Faculty also began communicating about how to use the rubric. When should it be distributed to the client? How should the client be informed about it? Should the primary instructor use it at the feedback stage to point out strengths and weaknesses? Should other readers do the same?

Finally, and perhaps most important, the rubric and some survey responses to particular content areas (e.g., budgeting, managing people) prompted the faculty to further explore where and how students gained these skills in the MPA curriculum. For example, the faculty began to discuss and review syllabi to consider how many courses required oral presentations or participation. More importantly, we considered how oral communication skills are obtained. Is the practice or opportunity to speak sufficient? Faculty give instructions and feedback on writing. How can we do the same on oral communication? This issue is part of an ongoing discussion. Faculty who do more to instruct their students on oral communication have shared materials with others. Group techniques and grading strategies have been exchanged.

Similarly, the faculty began to consider the extent to which students were required to search the literature and to read and interpret scholarly writings in MPA courses. Some courses are based primarily on reading assigned books. Students become familiar with the scholarly literature secondarily through reports of research in these books. Should all our courses require students to search and read scholarly journal articles in the area of the course? Of course, there are opportunity costs for such actions, like the loss of other material to be covered in the class. Faculty will begin to consider identifying research-, writing-, and oral-intensive classes to insure that students receive sufficient opportunity to learn, practice, and receive feedback on their performance in each of these areas before they come to an advanced seminar.

The faculty began using the rubric systematically across all capstone sessions in the fall of 2006 and revised the rubric for the spring semester of 2007. Thus, we are still new to the process. But, we have begun to build a longitudinal data base that will enable MPA administrators and faculty to examine student performance and changes across time. As the system develops and grows, we anticipate continued, if not greater, use of the outcome data to drive program design and improvement.

Conclusions

This approach to measuring student outcomes provided a successful start for faculty in the UCD MPA program to examine the extent to which students were achieving intended MPA goals. Jennings (1989, p. 441) states, "The only reliable way to determine the effectiveness of public affairs and administration programs would be to conduct outcome assessments focusing on the knowledge, values, and skills acquired by MPA graduates and the effectiveness of the graduates in their jobs." In spite of a number of articles describing studies of outcomes in MPA programs since that time, none have assessed actual student outcomes by examining the knowledge and skills that the students exhibited. By making use of the capstone course and a rubric aligned with the program's desired outcomes, the UCD SPA faculty began to get a sense of students' knowledge and skills upon completion of the program. Paired with student and alumni surveys that have items focused on the same outcomes, the faculty were able to learn more about graduates' assessments of their skills in broader settings. Finally, the program director was able to begin to engage faculty in a broader dialogue about student outcomes, achievement, and how the results could be used to improve the MPA program.

This approach is not without limitations. The focus was on student learning outcomes, not other elements of the mission. Our four criteria for knowledge and skills are quite broad and, by necessity, fail to reflect all the changes that may occur in students. These may be the most appropriate ways to measure student outcomes in graduate programs, though we hope to continue refining and modifying outcomes and measures. It is also important to note the absence of pre-program measures. With the rubric alone, we cannot conclude that graduates' levels of knowledge and skills are entirely due to the MPA program. But, the surveys provide some help in addressing this issue by providing graduates' assessments of the program's contribution to changes in their skills.

We encourage further reporting and research by other MPA programs that seek to measure graduates' knowledge, skills, and values. Such work is necessary to meet the demands for accountability, and, more important, to help faculty and administrators work as a team that uses student outcome data to make program improvements.

Notes

[1] The University of Delaware has begun its exploration of student outcomes by focusing on the broad skills of communication; planning, problem solving, and analytical ability; and initiative and leadership.

[2] Although other items on the student exit survey and the alumni survey differed, this series of items was identical on both surveys to permit comparison across measures.

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